

THE FATHER OF THE SCHMITT BOX^{1, 2}

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ABSTRACT: The origins of the Schmitt Box and collection are traced to the Rev. P. Jerome Schmitt at St. Vincent Archabbey, Latrobe, Pennsylvania. The ants in the collection are noted as being especially worthy of study.

DESCRIPTORS: Schmitt Box, ants, microcoleoptera, collection.

Have you ever wondered who it was that first designed the Schmitt Box, or when and under what circumstances this valuable device came into use? Written records of the origin are virtually non-existent, but Dr. Dean L. Gamble, formerly board chairman of Ward's Natural Science Establishment, which owns the rights to the original design, was very helpful and cooperative when we located him in retirement in California, and we thank both him and the Rev. Ambrose Keefe, reference librarian of Belmont Abbey College, who not only helped locate official records of the designer, but also provided valuable historical insights.

A century ago the Rev. P. Hieronymus (Jerome) Schmitt, O.S.B. began an illustrious career in entomology which was to result in a major collection amassed during the next three decades, and the insect storage and transfer device bearing his name. This latter device, used in some form currently by virtually every American entomologist, was not even mentioned by Father Jerome's eulogists, and the extent of his collection and its location were only briefly mentioned. This historical note will record information gleaned from the collection and from personal contacts, while outlining the life of this turn-of-the-century formicologist and pioneer microcoleopterologist.

An obituary in ENTOMOLOGICAL NEWS (1904), apparently written by one of the brothers at St. Vincent Archabbey, includes a photograph and some personal insights of this man born Gebhard Schmitt in 1857 in Wurttemberg, Germany. He was part of a group chosen for their industry who undertook clerical studies at St. Vincent in 1869. His ordination in 1881 coincided with his first teaching assignment at Belmont Abbey College (1880-82), which introduced him to the diversity of fauna in this

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North Carolina locale, and may have spurred him into the intensive collecting which marked the greater part of his later life. He returned to St. Vincent in the Appalachians of Pennsylvania for the remainder of his life, occasionally finding time to collect elsewhere, especially on visits to other institutions founded by the brothers of St. Vincent.

Since he was indefatigable as a collector and willing to send material he collected to specialists, he recognized the need for a sturdy, compact shipping box to supplement the cumbersome drawers used for the major collection. His original design for dermestid resistant boxes was turned over to the American Entomological Company of Brooklyn, probably about 1890. This company sold out to Ward's in 1913. Ward's not only purchased the business from Mr. George Franck, but hired Frank Rogowitz from the Brooklyn company's woodworking department so that they could truly claim to have "The Original Schmitt Box."

Father Jerome's collection, which narrowly escaped destruction in a major fire January 28, 1963, which claimed the extensive botany museum, suffers from the incompleteness of data common to most older collections, but usually has place names and/or dates on different animals in the same series. From these data on *Clavicorne* microcoleoptera an itinerary can be reconstructed for use in establishing localities where only dates are given, and approximate dates for material with only locales. Material collected before 1891 lacks dates, but probably is largely from St. Vincent, and is primarily ants. 1892 material from Mississippi and 1892 and 1893 material from California were apparently obtained by trades, but later collections often have valid data. He amassed most of his collection at St. Vincent (Beatty), west of Latrobe, Westmoreland Co., Pennsylvania⁵ from 1894 through 1904, but this was supplemented by the following interludes: an 1895 return to Belmont, N.C. from February through April 29, interrupted by a brief sojourn at St. Vincent from April 6 to 20; three short visits to Cullman, Alabama (St. Bernard's) occupying March 1, 1896, May 12 to 19, 1896, and February 1, 1898; and a trip to Canon City, Colorado (Holy Cross Abbey) from February 21 to April 2, 1900 (probably a bonus for time served the previous year as

⁵ A few collections labelled Chestnut Ridge, or "ridge" are from the area immediately east of the Abbey (St. Boniface Parish). Minor discrepancies noted in the Schmitt material in the Casey collection (NMNH) may have resulted from Casey incorrectly reattaching date labels.

subprior). Material labelled Covington, Kentucky is undated but probably resulted from a visit to St. Joseph's, a St. Vincent priory. Other material in the collection was received in trades, such as Iowa and Kansas series from H.F. Wickham.

Although there is no indication of special techniques used in collecting, Rev. Schmitt was primarily interested in ants, and these represent the largest single unit in his collection, including many paratypes among series identified by Wheeler, Wasmann, and Emery. The twelve drawers housing ants are at once the oldest, largest, and least curated, but will hopefully be reworked by an interested formicologist to try to analyze the specimens and the information they represent.

Lepidoptera are also extensively represented in the overall collection, filling 42 drawers, many of these being added recently by the current Father Jerome. And 22 drawers of hemipteroids, the work of Rev. Modestus Wirlner, O.S.B., are also available for study.

Father Jerome Schmitt developed an extensive coleopteran collection, with strengths in the clavicorne microcoleoptera, totalling 46 drawers. His interest in these latter probably developed because of the numbers of Pselaphidae and Scydmaenidae coinhabiting ant nests. Because these were small and poorly known he often collected them in relatively long series, and sent material to at least Col. John Casey, and H.F. Wickham (working with Emil Brendel). In fact, he sometimes split series of new species with resultant synonymy through publication of different new names by the two authorities. Synoptic collections of these are currently housed at St. Vincent. Uniques present in the original material sent to Casey are housed largely at the NMNH, and duplicates have been transferred to the collection at the Field Museum.

Although Rev. Schmitt's collecting ended in 1904, both his collection and the box which bears his name are available to present-day entomologists, insuring him a niche in entomological history. The Schmitt Box represents something of an investment, but the Schmitt collection is also worthy of some investment of time, and anyone wishing to examine it should contact the Rev. Jerome Rupprecht at St. Vincent Archabbey.

LITERATURE CITED

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